

Cal/EPA Environmental Justice Action Plan

Pilot Project Proposal Summary for Public Participation and Community Capacity Building – New River

January 21, 2005

- I. Lead Agency:** State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB)
- II. Area Proposed:** The New River from California/Mexico Border, the City of Calexico, Imperial County and north to the Salton Sea.

Area Demographics: The Imperial County is a rural, desert community located along the U.S./Mexico border, 100 miles east of San Diego. About 75% of the residents are of Mexican-American descent. The Imperial Valley's economy is based on agriculture; however, the agricultural industry has been in decline and the overall economy of the valley has been hurt since the passing of NAFTA. According to the 2000 Census, 46% of the population is in the low-income status; the poverty rate is 30%. The Imperial County has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country, over 26%; dropout rates are high at about 20%; and over a third of the residents in the county lack health insurance.¹

Background: The Calexico New River Committee, Inc. (CNRC) is a private non-profit corporation founded in 2001 to address the problem of pollution in the New River and its negative impact on the local and general community. The New River channel has for decades been a serious environmental and health problem needing urgent attention. The Imperial Valley community, marked by high unemployment, poverty, low education and low health indices, has not the economic or political clout to find expedient solution to the New River issue.

The New River has been recognized as a significant pollution problem since at least the late 1940s, primarily because of its extremely high concentrations of fecal coliform bacteria and stench at its entry to the United States. Our community has been working futilely for over fifty years on this problem. The Calexico New River Committee has been able to harness enthusiastic support from the community during the three years since its inception and has pledged support from our representatives and legislators.

The Calexico New River Committee members are strongly committed to the project, have proven themselves responsible over the years and represent various segments of the population: The Chairman of the Committee, Rudy Maldonado, serves in the Board of Directors of Division 5 of the Imperial Irrigation District; Javier Alatorre represents the Imperial County Assessors Office and is the previous Mayor of the City of Calexico; Jose Carrillo is a Coordinator with the County of Imperial Public Health department; Kimberly Collins is the Director of the California Center for Border and Regional Economic Studies at the Imperial Valley Campus of the San Diego State University; Luis Estrada is the Supervisor

¹ 2000 Census

of the Waste Water Treatment Plant and interim Manager for the City of Calexico; Richard Harmon is the Chief of Staff for Assemblywoman Bonnie Garcia; Jose Lopez is the Executive Director of Campesinos Unidos, Inc., a healthcare organization; Stephen Martin is the Patrol Agent-in-Charge of the U.S. Border Patrol, El Centro Station; Eduardo Niebla is a Chemistry Instructor at the Imperial Valley College; and Jose M. Rodriguez Jr. serves as the Imperial County Assessor. All of them are Calexico residents.

Project Need. Health Impacts to the adult and child population living along the New River from the Mexico/California border to the Salton Sea. The New River runs from Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico, through Calexico, California and is considered to be one of the most polluted waterways in North America. The source of the pollution is waste from agricultural chemical runoff from the area's farm industry (69.6%), human waste from the ever-expanding population in Mexicali (29%), and manufacturing plants operating in Mexico (1.4%).² The river contains a nightmare stew of about 100 biological contaminants, volatile organic compounds, heavy metals, and pesticides including: DDT, PCB, selenium, uranium, arsenic and mercury. The river also holds the toxins that cause tuberculosis, encephalitis, polio, cholera, hepatitis and typhoid, all flowing untreated through the city;³ levels for many of these contaminants are in violation of U.S. EPA and Cal/EPA standards.⁴ The problem is expected to worsen for Calexico (pop. 36,000 of which one-third is under the age of 18) as Mexicali's population of about 1.5 million continues to expand.

Socioeconomic Impacts. The river's environment is in a critical condition, its noxious odor can be noticed well inside residential areas and its toxic foam blows into the parking lot of one of the commercial centers and toward the downtown area. Furthermore, the Westside of Calexico suffers from direct exposure to the river; land adjacent to the river is undeveloped and economic growth in this area is stagnant.

Although Mexico suffers from a notable lack of resources to be allocated to environmental and health projects, the Mexican government has taken the initiative to protect its citizens and has encased the river in cement tubing through the main populated areas. The city of Mexicali has even invested in government buildings, cultural centers, parks and a main avenue on top of the enclosed river.

This project will also seek a systematic solution on the U.S. side of the New River to protect residents, a project that can be developed, monitored and enforced by U.S. standards. The project will serve to identify stakeholders along all impacted communities and explore partnerships to address pollution of the New River as it flows into the U.S. The project will also seek to increase public awareness to keep the community educated and organized about the health issues and hazards the New River poses.

² According to State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB), the New River carries at least 10 million gallons per day of raw sewage from the city of Mexicali. SWRCB "Introduction to the New River/Mexicali Sanitation Program." Website <http://www.swrcb.ca.gov/rwqcb7/newriver/nr-intro.html>

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Public Health Services, Agency for Toxic Substances Disease registry 1996, 1999, and 2000 reports.

⁴ SWRQCB

III. Project Start Date: March 2005

IV. Project End Date: June 2006

V. Goal & Objectives:

- a. Goal:** Establish a collaborative effort to increase public awareness/participation efforts to reduce environmental and health impacts from pollution in the New River.
- b. Objectives:**
 - Establish a Local Advisory Group comprised of community, government and Tribal members impacted by decisions or activities along the New River to review health data, listen from community members and Tribes, identify health and contamination issues and propose strategies to address those health and contamination issues.
 - Establish strategies to minimize exposure of children to contaminants in the New River.
 - Establish long-term strategies to reduce farm runoff contaminants.
 - Establish a long-term strategy to work with the Mexican government and reduce raw sewage dumping in the New River.

VI. Activities – Planning, Implementation, Evaluation, & Deliverables

Planning

Site Selection: The Calexico New River Committee has been actively pursuing support from federal and state government to assist in resolving the problem of the New River. The New River flows northward from Mexico into the United States through the community of Calexico, California, population 36,000. The neighboring city to the south is Mexicali, population 1.5 million, and industrial border city with over one hundred manufacturing plants called “Maquiladoras.” Mexico provides more lax environmental regulations on the maquiladoras, making it appealing for industry to locate there. Over the years, the New River has been used as a sewage collection system by these maquiladoras and with an inadequate sewer infrastructure the city also contributes raw sewage into the New River.

The New River flows through the City of Calexico, creating a foul stench in the air and has been dubbed the most polluted river in the United States. Children’s health issues, including strep, tuberculosis, polio, cholera, hepatitis, and typhoid. In addition, high concentrations of PCBs and mercury have been found in fish collected and tested near the border.

Finally, this project is supported by the City of Calexico, various community based organizations, citizen support and support from elected officials.

The community of Calexico is predominantly Latino and with average annual household income of \$14,000, meeting the State's definition of an environmental justice community.

- **Reduction of Risk to Children's Health:** Short-term approach would seek the reduction of risk to children's health by increasing awareness to parents and children of the health hazards posed by the New River. The long term approach is to establish long term commitments by the primary polluters to take measures in reducing the introduction of contaminants into the New River and take immediate steps for the remediation of waterways determined to have the highest concentration of pollutants affecting human health. Success of these efforts will be measured through the successful cooperation of impacted communities and Tribes, and through tracking health data.
- **Cal/EPA Cross-Media Implication:** SWRCB will work with other Cal/EPA Boards, Departments, and Office to identify cross-media opportunities as the project proceeds.
- **Partnerships:** There are several existing organizations now supporting this effort. However, partnerships need to be developed with various governmental entities and Tribes, as follows: Imperial County; Cities of Brawley, Imperial, El Centro, Westmoreland, Salton City, Salton Sea Beach and Desert Shores; Torres Martinez Tribe; USEPA; Department of Health Services; Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment; Air Resources Board; Department of Pesticide Regulation; Department of Agriculture; Department of Fish and Game; and, Department of Water Resources.

Implementation

- **Methodology & Performance Indicators:** The Local Advisory Group will establish methodologies and performance indicators with assistance from government, Tribal and private health and education professionals and through open discussions conducted during regular meetings.
- **Public Participation:** Through the Calexico New River Committee, a Local Advisory Group will be established representing all those listed in the Partnerships of this proposal as well as the general public. Meetings will be conducted on a regular basis where data is presented and recommendations made. All decisions will require public input prior to implementation.

▪ **Project Work Plan & Timeline:**

	Activity	Start Date	End Date
Phase 1	1. Identify pilot project location(s)	1 st Qtr 2005	1 st Qtr 2005
	2. Define project parameters	1 st Qtr 2005	1 st Qtr 2005
Phase 2	1. Establish Local Advisory Groups (LAGs)Collect project data	2 nd Qtr 2005	Ongoing
	2. Collect Project Data	2 nd Qtr 2005	3 rd Qtr 2005
	3. Evaluate Data & Write Report	3 rd Qtr 2005	4 th Qtr 2005
Phase 3	1. Develop Children's Environmental Risk Reduction Plan (ChERRP)	1 st Qtr 2006	1 st Qtr 2006
Phase 4	1. Implement ChERRP	2 nd Qtr 2006	Ongoing
Phase 5	1. Evaluate ChERRP	4 th Qtr 2006	Ongoing
	2. Explore implementation options of project	1 st Qtr 2007	Ongoing

Evaluation & Deliverables

- **Results:** Tests will be conducted on a regular ongoing basis including: Monitoring the number of illnesses among children from viruses related to the New River will be tracked; Water fowl and fish will be tested periodically to assess ingestion of PCBs or mercury; and the river will be tested at various points to assess contamination types and levels.
- **Deliverables:**
 - A successful awareness campaign in Spanish and English;
 - A reduction of contaminants in the New River;
 - A reduction in viruses found in children within the targeted region.
- **Considerations, Anticipated Challenges/Constraints:** Potential challenges to this project include: ensuring appropriate resources; resolving community conflicts; obtaining support from farmers; and, addressing international aspects.

VII. For More Information:

Comments, Questions, or Concerns regarding this Pilot?

Please direct comments, questions, or concerns to:

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